

Practical Wisdom and the Program Coordinator

Richard B. Gunderman MD, PhD

Department of Radiology, Indiana University, 702 North Barnhill Drive, Room
1053, Indianapolis, IN 46202

Long-serving radiology residency program coordinators know that the amount of time and energy they must devote to entering, retrieving, and analyzing data and learning the information systems required to do so has increased substantially over the past few decades. Noting such changes, many observers might conclude that the knowledge required of a program coordinator is almost entirely technical in nature. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

In one of the most important works in the Western intellectual tradition, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (384–322 BC) introduces a distinction between two different types of knowledge (1). One type he calls technical knowledge—knowing how to turn out some product or achieve some end. A recipe for a cake, for example, is a type of technical knowledge, as is the knowledge of how to use various tools, such as a spoon, bowl, and mixer.

The other type of knowledge he calls practical wisdom—the ability to see what is called for in a particular situation. While a recipe for baking a cake and a set of instructions for using a particular kitchen utensil can be written down and, if followed, enable the user to achieve the objective at hand, practical wisdom is not recordable in the same way. Practical wisdom cannot be separated from the person who possesses and manifests it.

Suppose, for example, that a colleague expresses distress over the fact that her contributions are not recognized or appreciated. If the confidante correctly surmises that what the colleague needs is an edible

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expression of appreciation, such as a cake, then technical knowledge of how to bake a cake may prove quite useful. By contrast, if the colleague primarily needs someone to listen to her concerns, then presenting her with a cake may accomplish little.

One of the greatest threats to program coordinators and those they work with is the failure to understand the importance of practical wisdom in work. Too often, the responsibilities of program coordinators are conceived in largely or even purely technical form—purely as a set of activities or functions, sometimes without any reference to the kind of persons coordinators need to be or become in order to fully answer their professional calling.

Consider one institution's generic list of duties and responsibilities for program coordinators (2). This job description includes the following: office management, including improving workflow and cost effectiveness; complying with accrediting agency policies; overseeing orientation; maintaining filing, record keeping, and other systems; maintaining databases; overseeing purchasing; maintaining external program marketing; verifying trainee status; and so on.

While such activities are integral to the work of most program coordinators, such a job description does a great disservice to radiology departments, program directors, faculty and trainees, and even coordinators themselves, all of whom should know that a good coordinator is far more than a mere technician. To neglect such responsibilities is to fail as a coordinator, but treating a coordinator's calling as nothing more than a matter of technique represents an equally egregious error.

In many departments, the full-time staff member with whom residents interact most frequently is the program coordinator. The department chair is often preoccupied with other concerns and may even be away frequently. Many program directors spend much of their time tending to clinical duties that prevent them from seeing their residents for any length of time. And many faculty members work with each particular resident for only a period of weeks once or twice per year.

By contrast, residents at many programs interact with the coordinator on a weekly or even daily basis. They stop by the office to pick up mail, to fill out forms, to check on schedules, to catch up with other residents, and attend to a host of other matters. During such interactions, coordinators enjoy the opportunity to get to know residents not just as functionaries but as human beings with distinctive personalities, life experiences, and hopes.

There are respects in which residents at every level of training resemble one another. For example, first-year radiology residents are typically trying to figure out how the residency system works and make sure they meet all their responsibilities. By contrast, final-year residents may be preoccupied with the transition to fellowship or independent practice. Experienced coordinators can anticipate such needs and make relevant resources available to each group.

Yet every first-year resident is not the same as every other, and the same goes for residents at every stage of training. Residents are not merely widgets moving down a radiologist assembly line. They are also people leading human lives, with all the challenges and opportunities that life presents. To treat them as though they were nothing more than their job description would do them as grave a disservice as treating program coordinators in the same fashion.

One resident may be falling in love. Another may be in the midst of a breakup. One may be planning a marriage, while another may be suffering through a divorce. One may be welcoming a new child into the family, while another may be dealing with the illness or death of a parent or grandparent. Residents may be struggling with their own illnesses, mental health issues, or substance abuse. Or they may need someone with whom to share and celebrate joyous news.

In many instances, one of the most natural people in a radiology department for a resident to share such life experiences with may be the program coordinator. And if such sharing is not forthcoming, coordinators who know their trainees well may be the first to sense that residents have something in their

heart they need to share, or to recognize that a resident is not faring well and needs help—often before residents themselves perceive such needs.

A coordinator who does not perform the functions described in the job description is a coordinator in name only. But there is a difference between mere competence and excellence. An excellent program coordinator is more than a serviceable bureaucrat, someone who knows how to ride a desk. An excellent coordinator is someone residents know, respect, and rightly believe they can trust. An excellent coordinator cares about residents, and they know it.

Of course, it is difficult or impossible to operationalize such excellence. There is no recipe or instruction manual for it. Such excellence is the product not so much of what a coordinator does or does not do but instead a matter of who the coordinator is. An excellent coordinator is someone who wants to build good relationships with residents and who derives genuine fulfillment from helping them surmount challenges and thrive.

An excellent coordinator, in other words, is a generous and even caring person. It is important to help residents stay well-informed, on track, and out of trouble. But real excellence is not a matter of managing them. It is a matter of caring about them. Excellent coordinators are proud of their residents, build relationships with them that continue beyond the years of residency, and suffer and rejoice right along with them as their lives unfold.

Aristotle's distinction between technical knowledge and practical wisdom says as much. The technician merely knows, while the practically wise person embodies real virtues, such as generosity, compassion, and even the courage to say what needs to be said. Moreover, the practically wise person is imbued with goodwill, the desire to see others flourish. To care for someone, after all, is to delight in seeing them thrive.

Technical expertise is necessary for a program coordinator, but it is not sufficient. To technical knowledge and skills must be added practical wisdom, the ability to perceive what residents need,

sometimes before they perceive it themselves, as well as the desire and know-how to help them get it. Each resident and situation is different, and it is in recognizing and responding effectively to this distinctness that truly great coordinators shine.

References

1 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics. 1140a24-1140b12.

2 Partners Graduate Medical Education. Coordinator job description. Available at:

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